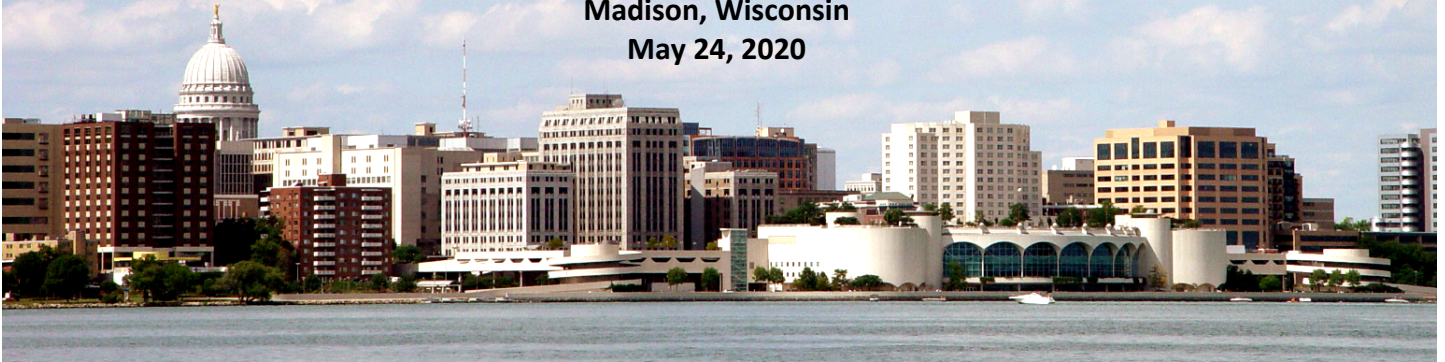


# The Kingdom of Leaven

**MATTHEW 13:33**

**Baxter T. Exum (#1547)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
May 24, 2020**



**\*\*COVID-19 LIVESTREAM\*\***

Good morning! It is a blessing to be with all of you this morning. As our custom has been over the past few months, you can see that we are starting with the plan of salvation. And, once again, we also have some pictures of a recent baptism. These are some pictures of Lyndsey, taken within the last week or so at the Lakeside Church of Christ in Somerset, Kentucky. Somerset is about two hours straight south of Lexington, Kentucky, just to the west of the Daniel Boone National Forest, where I've done some camping on my way to Tennessee over the past few years. But I'm sharing this as an example. If you have not yet obeyed the gospel, there is still time!

The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised from the dead. We obey the gospel by believing the message, at which point we turn away from sin, we confess Jesus as being the Son of God, we obey the Lord's command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, and then the Christian life begins. If you have any questions, if you would like to study together, if there is something holding you back, please get in touch, and we would love to discuss it. My contact information is on the screen. If you are joining us on the phone, the church's number is 608-224-0274. You can also send a text to this number. Or, if you have internet access, head to our website or send an email to the address on the screen. Obviously, meeting online like this is not ideal, but we have had some very good feedback over the past few months. We've had some very good Bible discussions that we probably would not have had if we had been meeting in person. So, I know we really want to be back together, but there have been some benefits and some conversations that we might not have had if we had only been meeting in our building.

And speaking of meeting in our building, we hope to resume worshipping together on June 7, if at all possible. Two weeks from today! Since we are limited to 25 people, we're planning on having two services – one at 9 and one at 10:30 – and all of us will need to sign up to make sure we have a spot. If you're sick or at risk, stay home for now and continue with the livestream. We've put a plan in today's bulletin with some more information. But if you have any questions, please give me a call.

Over the past few weeks, many of us have done quite a bit more baking than we ever would have done without the safer at home orders. And some of you might have noticed that because of this, we are having a yeast shortage. I've been doing our grocery shopping since this thing started, and a month or so ago, I actually had to

call around try to find some yeast. There was nothing at either Woodman's, there was nothing at Aldi, there was nothing at the Pick-'n-Save near our house, nothing at Hy-vee, nothing at Festival Foods in Verona, so in a last ditch effort, I made a quick call to Miller and Sons in Verona. I usually go there only for the world's best peanut butter (due to a suggestion from the Eacret family a few years ago), but when I called, the guy immediately said, "Nope, no yeast," but then he said, "Wait just a minute." He came back on the line and said, "We just got some in." I said, "I'm at Farm and Fleet; I will be there in three minutes," and I was. I got there and hit the yeast jackpot! I have the last yeast in Dane County! So, we have been alright for the past several weeks. But that is the last yeast that I have seen anywhere.

We use yeast at our house. I have made our favorite biscuits for some of our men's breakfasts through the years. We got the recipe from Marcy Jo's Mealhouse down near Columbia, Tennessee.

I'm the pizza maker at our house. I'm no pro like some of you are, but we have perfected the recipe through the years, and it seems to just keep on getting better.

I'm also the pretzel maker at our house. We used to use the kits from the Amish stores, but a few weeks ago we tried a recipe that a few people in our family have declared to be "the best ever." I don't waste time tying pretzels into knots. You can eat them faster and they fit on the pan better when they are straight. By the way, I was born in Freeport, Illinois, the home of the Pretzels. My dad taught speech and English at Freeport High School for a number of years, before he went into preaching, and their mascot is a pretzel, going back to a German bakery in town, known for their pretzels back in the 1850's.

But even if we don't personally use yeast at home, most of us appreciate bread. And in our society, most of us have a nearly unlimited supply of bread in all forms – loaves of bread, gluten free, tortillas, English muffins, muffins, bagels, croissants, pitas, biscuits, naan, corn bread, and on and on. We love fresh bread. Just a few days ago, I woke up at 11 o'clock at night to the smell of fresh bread. As an old guy now, 11 o'clock is the middle of the night for me. But the smell of fresh bread at 11 p.m. was both awesome and infuriating. It smelled so good, but I was sleeping! We love fresh bread. On a trip up to Ironwood, Michigan, last summer, we found a new bakery up there, "Bake Superior Bread." It was worth the trip just to watch them make it, and to smell it, and to be there for the samples. I think we went to this place twice in two days, and we are looking forward to going back. If you ever make it to Ironwood, Bake Superior Bread will make your trip worthwhile.

With this in mind, I want us to look at a passage where Jesus compares his kingdom to the leaven that is placed into a batch of flour. The passage is found in Matthew 13:33. As we all make our way to Matthew 13:33, I'll just mention that yeast, as we think of it, is a rather modern invention. Two-thousand years ago, they couldn't get yeast in jars or in neat little foil packets, but it was closer to what we might think of as sourdough starter. These little microorganisms are in the air, and they get going whenever flour and water are mixed together and left out for a while. They basically convert carbohydrates into carbon dioxide and alcohol. It's a process, but before baking the daily bread, people would pull some out to save it for the next day. This would save you from starting from scratch every time, and it could go on like this for years, even for generations. I've read that mothers would sometimes pass this down to their daughters. If you have a chance, and if you have Netflix, I would highly recommend an interesting documentary, "Cooked," and in Episode 3, titled "Air," they do a great job explaining all of this, and they focus in on how bread has developed through the years, and how bread is still baked in the middle east even today, which is probably pretty similar to what Jesus refers to in Matthew 13. Again, "Cooked," on Netflix, Episode 3, entitled "Air."

Today's passage is extremely short, one of the shortest parables Jesus ever told, one verse, just a few words. And it's also unusual, because he never explains it. Often, Jesus will explain the parables, but not this one. And this has led to some misunderstandings. And one of the main misunderstandings goes back to the fact that just about every other reference to **"leaven"** in the scriptures is negative, very negative. In fact, this seems to be one of the only positive references to leaven. Several days ago, our daughter walked by as I was studying for this lesson, and when she found out I would be preaching on yeast, she immediately said, "You mean, how yeast is bad?" And that is a natural assumption, because just about every other reference to leaven in the Bible is extremely negative. We remember Jesus warning about the **"leaven of the Pharisees,"** referring to their hypocrisy that had a way of spreading. We think about Paul comparing sin to leaven in 1 Corinthians 5. He was making the point that the church needs to remove the evil man before the sin spreads to the rest of the congregation. Some, then, have seen the reference to leaven here in Matthew 13, and they have seen this as being a bad thing. However, as we look at the passage, I want us to notice that it's not a matter of leaven harming the kingdom in some way, but instead, the kingdom itself is compared to leaven. And in context, this is a good thing. Right before this, Jesus compares his kingdom to a mustard seed – it's small, but it grows. In the same way, leaven also starts small, but it grows as well. We need to keep in mind, then, that leaven itself is not necessarily evil.

So, let's look together at Matthew 13:33. Referring to Jesus, the Bible says, **"He spoke another parable to them, 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.'"** So, why does Jesus use leaven to describe the kingdom of heaven? Before we make the comparisons, let's realize that the kingdom of heaven simply refers to God's rule. In fact, in his account of this parable, Luke has Jesus referring to the **"kingdom of God."** A kingdom is the realm of a king. And today, God rules in his church. Many times in scripture, the kingdom and the church are referred to almost interchangeably. So, we are talking about God's rule, God's kingdom. In what way is God's rule compared to leaven. Again, one of the dangers with this short parable is that Jesus never explains it. So, we're left on our own a little bit here. But I do think we do have some good clues in the text itself. In the time we have left, I want us to look at the text and come away with three ways that the kingdom of heaven is like leaven.

**I. First of all, as Jesus describes this woman as hiding the leaven in the flour, we learn that the growth of God's kingdom is often INVISIBLE.**

Notice: Jesus says that a woman took the leaven and **"hid"** it in the flour. Some translations might refer to her **"mixing"** the leaven into the dough, and that might be what happens, but that's not the word Jesus uses here. He uses a Greek word that we have carried over into English in a form that is pretty familiar to us today in the word "encrypt." In a sense, then, this woman "encrypts" the leaven. Literally, she **"hides"** it **"in"** the flour. To encrypt something is to hide it, to make it invisible, to make it disappear. Maybe you've seen somebody buried in a "crypt." Literally, a crypt is somewhere we "hide" a body. We put it somewhere where it not seen. It is hidden. This is the word Jesus uses here. The woman takes the leaven and she **"hides"** it in the flour. Once the leaven is added to the flour, it basically disappears. It's out of sight.

So, what does this mean in terms of the kingdom of heaven? Of course, it doesn't stay hidden (we will get to that in just a moment), but it means that God's rule (his kingdom) often starts out very small, and the work that God does is often invisible to the naked eye. Yes, the leaven is **"hidden"** in the flour, but it is still there; it is living and active; but it is working behind the scenes. And isn't this how the kingdom of heaven grows? Doesn't James compare the word of God to a seed that's planted and sprouts and grows in honest hearts? Doesn't Peter refer to us being **"...born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word**

**of God**”? Yes, the word of God is living and active (as we find in Hebrews 4:12), and like leaven, it starts small. It works invisibly, behind the scenes. As the word of God is preached, as the word is read and studied, it sprouts, and grows, and takes root, and much of this happens in a way that is not visible. It’s hard to track this. We can’t see this kind of kingdom growth on a graph. This, by the way, has been one of the challenges of keeping an eye on the health of the congregation over the past few months. Sometimes, we might be tempted to equate an attendance figure with spiritual health. And we understand why. We understand the connection. It is important that we assemble together. And often, if somebody stops attending, it can be a symptom of a deeper problem. On the other hand, just because I come to a public assembly, that doesn’t mean I’m okay with God either. It’s almost like our blood pressure, and weight, and bloodwork at the doctor’s office. Those numbers are important, but they aren’t everything – we might be unhealthy with good numbers and healthy with bad numbers – but the numbers might be an indicator. And that has been a special challenge over the past few weeks: How do we as shepherds keep an eye on the spiritual health of the congregation? What are the indicators? It’s a challenge, but it’s also a reminder that spiritual health is not always visible. And in this passage, Jesus seems to be very specifically saying that the growth of God’s rule is often invisible. His kingdom is often hidden, working behind the scenes. His kingdom is encrypted. You can’t put a number on it. And unlike the mustard tree, you cannot measure it. You don’t see it.

And personally, this should be at least a bit encouraging to those who teach and preach. So often, we study and share, and we don’t see anything happening. Yes, the Lord has promised that when his word goes out, it will not return to him empty. Isaiah compares the work of a prophet to the work of the rain and the snow (one of many positive references to snow in the Bible). In Isaiah 55:10-11, the prophet explains that just as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, causing the earth to bring forth **“seed for the sower and bread for the eater”** (in keeping with today’s parable), so also God’s word goes forth and always accomplishes what God intends. Sometimes, though, it is discouraging to not see any results. I’ve mentioned before, that this is why I like signing up for lawnmowing and snow removal at church sometimes. The grass is long, I drive across town and mow it, and the grass is now short. We have a foot of snow, I fire up the snowblower, and the snow is gone. I did a thing, and something happened. There is a before and there is an after. It is visible. But this is not always the case with preaching. And Jesus seems to be telling us this here in Matthew 13. The growth of the kingdom is often hidden, like leaven hidden in lump of dough.

## II. As we go back to the text, I want us to move on and to notice that the leaven is PERVASIVE.

It spreads. It incorporates itself fully into the lump of dough. It permeates the flour. It doesn’t stay over in one corner of this huge pile of flour, but it spreads, it moves, it takes over. It is pervasive. And this is where I learned something that I had never noticed before. In my mind, I always imagined this as something we might do. When I was growing up, my mom would make bread from time to time. As I said earlier, we make bread at our house every once in a while. But we make maybe two loaves at a time. We deal in rather small batches. I don’t know how many bread pans we have – two, maybe three – and so when we make bread, we’re using 4, 5, maybe 6 cups of flour. And that’s the way I always pictured this parable. After all, Jesus describes **“three measures”** or **“three pecks”** of flour, and in my mind, I’m thinking along the lines of three cups. But that is not what is going on here. We look up the actual word Jesus uses in this passage, and the measurement is perhaps equivalent to 1-½ pecks. That doesn’t help me. I don’t deal in pecks. We look it up, though, and a peck is pretty much equivalent to two dry gallons, almost 9 liters, or ¼ of a bushel. I’m thinking of those bags with the handles we might get apples in at the orchard. Well, the term Jesus uses is maybe 1-½ of these, so we multiply this by three, and end up with somewhere around 60 pounds of flour! I’m out here in my garage, so I have a 40-pound bag of

dog food right here from Costco. This is a lot of dog food. But Jesus is talking about a bag and a half of this, only flour. Once in our marriage we bought a 50-pound bag of flour, back when my wife was still in college. We lived off of that bag of flour for 2-3 months, as I remember it. But this woman is making it all into bread at the same time. Nobody does this, at least not in a family setting, unless you have a huge family. This is enough bread for perhaps hundreds of people. By the way, this is the same amount of flour Abraham told Sarah to prepare for the three visitors in Genesis 18. And we do know that Abraham and Sarah had a huge household with many servants. This is also very roughly the same amount of flour Gideon was offering to God in Judges 6 and the same amount that Hannah brought to God in 1 Samuel 1. It is a large amount, roughly a bushel of flour or more. It is extravagant, above and beyond what a normal person would bake for one family.

So, what in the world is going on here? I'm starting to realize that Jesus is perhaps exaggerating a bit to make a point. I'm thinking about the Lord referring to having a plank in your eye, or making more than a hundred gallons of wine, or feeding 5,000 - that kind of thing - above and beyond what might be considered normal. So, there's a woman making bread, she's using 60 pounds of flour, she hides the leaven in it, and the leaven spreads throughout **"all"** of it. With this in mind, with this huge pile of flour, it seems, then, that Jesus is emphasizing how a little leaven has a way of spreading. And this is, indeed, what we know to be true about yeast. It spreads. We don't just leaven half a loaf! When I make pizza, we don't have a flat side and a fluffy side. The same goes for pretzels and biscuits. When we add yeast, we count on it permeating the entire loaf. That's how it works. That's what yeast does. And this is what the kingdom does - it spreads! It has, and it does. In Matthew 24:14, Jesus said that, ***"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world..."*** And it was. By the time we get to Colossians 1:23 (written in the early 60's AD), Paul says that the gospel at that time had been ***"proclaimed in all creation under heaven."*** It spread. And when we get the word out, we participate in this leavening process. We are the kingdom, in a sense. We are the leaven. When I love my neighbor as myself, the kingdom spreads. When we provide food and clothing in the name of Jesus, the kingdom spreads. When we share a link or get the word out through a correspondence course, the kingdom spreads. As Habakkuk tells us in Habakkuk 2:14, ***"...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."*** Like leaven, the kingdom of heaven is always spreading, as the Word is taught, from one person to another. It is pervasive. Before we move on, I would ask: Are you contributing to this? As a part of God's kingdom, are you personally contributing to the spread of the kingdom?

**III. And this leads us to a third very closely related characteristic of the kingdom - we find it at the very end of this passage as we find that leaven CHANGES THINGS - leaven is INFLUENTIAL.**

And this is where we get back to the idea that leaven is always bad in scripture. It is not. Usually it is used to illustrate something bad, but not always. Leaven is influential. And obviously, we can be an influence for good or for bad. But the point for us here is: Leaven changes things. Leaven is influential. And if leaven does not influence, something has gone wrong; the leaven has failed. We had some interesting discussions in our family this week about proofing yeast. But ultimately, how do you know that yeast is working? You wait! You can test it by mixing it with water and some sugar or honey, and wait for some bubbles. Or you just jump right in and wait for a bit. When I make pizza, one of the steps is to get everything mixed together, and to knead it for a bit, and then to put it in an oiled and covered bowl in a warm oven for an hour or so. And when you do that, you know you are working with yeast! It goes in small and comes out a lot larger. And the reason is: Yeast changes things. This is the nature of leaven. Yeast is influential.

In the same way, God's kingdom also has a way of changing people. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says, ***"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."*** The

gospel has a way of changing us. We were like this, but now we are like this. Paul gave some examples in a previous letter, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, when he said, ***“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.”*** And then he went on to say, ***“Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”*** And so there was a change that took place. They heard the gospel, they believed it, and they were influenced by it – they were transformed, just as flour is different from bread.

Earlier, I mentioned watching the documentary on Netflix this week, and I think I remember him saying something to the effect that if you only had a cup of wheat every day, you would eventually starve to death; but converted into bread, you could pretty much live forever. I’m simplifying it, of course, but his point is: The leavening process has a way of breaking down the nutrients in a way that the human body can handle. Bread might be made out of wheat, but it is fundamentally different than wheat. And my point in bringing this up now is that like leaven, the kingdom of heaven is also influential. The word of God changes us. It starts small, it grows, and it changes us.

### **Conclusion:**

As we come to the end of this short passage, I hope we’ve learned something. This makes me want to make some pretzels again. But we learn from this short parable that the kingdom of heaven works behind the scenes (it is often invisible). We learn here that the kingdom is designed to spread. It is pervasive. We have a part in that. And finally, the kingdom of heaven is influential. It has a way of changing us. We hear the word, that word takes root in our hearts, and we become more loving, more righteous, and better servants today than we were yesterday. Like leaven, we grow; we are transformed – not just outwardly, but in the hidden person of the heart.

If you have any questions about God’s plan, if you would like to study further, please get in touch. I hope you can join us this coming Wednesday evening at 7 as we continue in our study of Luke in Luke 4.

As we close today, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you this morning for being the all-powerful and wise God who continues to provide our daily bread. Thank you for taking care of us and for blessing us with resources that we can share with others.

Today we are thankful for your word and for your Son, the Bread of Life. We pray for your kingdom, the church, and we pray that you would rule in our hearts. You are the great and awesome king. We pray that we would live our lives with you in mind at all times, that we would honor you in everything we do.

As we live in a fallen world that continues to be harassed by sin and death, we ask for your blessings on those who work in healthcare. Bless our first responders with the special challenges they are facing right now. Be with the members of our congregation whose jobs have become quite a bit more complicated and stressful lately.

As we come closer to coming back together as a congregation, we pray that you would be with the shepherds of this congregation so that no one gets left behind spiritually in this process. Give all of us patience as we learn and as we grow through this.

We come to you this morning in the name of Jesus, praising you for making a way for us to come back to you. Lord, come quickly. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)